

Hard Hats and Software

Promoting Good E-Government in Africa

By Doug Barry
U.S. Commercial Service

John D. Parks grew up working in his family's construction business in the sun-splashed community of Riverside, California. Two years ago, he put together a team to build HardHatBid, Inc. The team spotted an unfilled need in bidding and procurement processes, and recently HardHatBid negotiated a very large contract with the government of Ghana. How did the team do it?

Through their experience in the construction business, team members knew of the difficulties in bidding and procurement cycles. "There is a noticeable lack of transparency, connectivity, and accountability in these systems," says Parks.

Out of their analysis came an idea for a solution: the Double Blind Electronic Bidding System (DBS), computer software for improving the quality and efficiency of bidding and procurement. But the team's bigger insight was that the DBS could make any procurement process more transparent, which would be a boon for governments and government agencies all over the world.

E-GOVERNMENT IN EMERGING MARKETS

Parks explains that there is substantial interest in creating more efficient e-government systems. With the help of the U.S. Commercial Service, HardHatBid found an interested buyer in Ghanaian President John Kufuor, who had campaigned for office on an economic development, anti-corruption platform. Parks said there is considerable urgency in developing countries to create transparent government processes and involve local businesses that do not typically receive government contracts. Says Parks, "Encouraging economic development and local growth becomes a national security issue. Providing good governance and accountability helps to stabilize society."

The negotiations with the government of Ghana took months of hard work, including a detailed analysis of the Ghanaian economy, developing a relationship with the Ghanaian ambassador to the United States in Washington, D.C., and meeting with officials in Accra, the capital of Ghana. Ghana put the contract out for bid worldwide, but only HardHatBid met the specifications.

UNIVERSAL BIDDING

HardHatBid's solution went beyond software to include the creation of 50 community development centers in every district in Ghana. These "walk-in centers" enable prospective bidders to access government solicitations, download blueprints, become compliant with government regulations, and create and submit bids. Where electricity is spotty or nonexistent, the centers generate their own power and provide Internet access. One of the things Ghanaian officials liked about the HardHatBid system is that a person can be trained on how to use it in less than 30 minutes. One welcome feature of the system, says Parks, is that all on-line forms are written in plain language.

The first phase of project development will involve interviewing representatives from every national and local government department. The system will be customized to handle all the bidding and procurement needs on everything from housing and public works to education and defense. Each department's needs will be matched to the overall government economic development policy.

But isn't the system only as good and honest as the people operating it? Yes, says Parks, but there are built-in features that make it difficult for shenanigans to go unnoticed for long. "If for some reason a single contractor keeps getting contracts from a specific department, the system automatically sends a red flag to several managers," explains Parks. He says the software can detect "patterns of impropriety," and that the availability of this and other information "empowers government managers to do more of the right thing and to do it better and faster."

HELP FROM THE U.S. COMMERCIAL SERVICE

Eduard Roytberg, a U.S. Commercial Service trade specialist in southern California, has worked with HardHatBid since it started and believes the company is developing a solid niche. "This technology creates

a fairness platform that if faithfully implemented can help a country or region to become more attractive to foreign and domestic investment, more stable politically, and simply a better place in which to do business," notes Roytberg.

Parks credits Roytberg and his colleagues with opening doors for his company. Specifically, says Parks, the U.S. Commercial Service held

seminars on exporting, scheduled appointments with officials in Ghana, and assisted in the selection of Parks as a participant in the trade mission to Ghana and South Africa, led by Secretary of Commerce Donald Evans, in November.

Parks has advice for small companies seeking international sales. First, do your homework. Second, use the resources of the U.S. government, including the U.S. Commercial Service of the Commerce Department. "The government can give you great credibility in many parts of the world," says Parks. Third, understand your buyer. The buyer has to like you and your company before he will buy your product.

What's next for HardHatBid? "We have been engaged by six additional countries in Africa. Also, countries and private enterprises on every continent have approached us about implementing DBS. We know that 2003 will be a great year for us, because we're riding a trend that merges the Internet, economic development, and good governance." ■



John Parks (R), CEO of HHB, with Commerce Secretary Evans during a recent mission to Africa.

Photo courtesy of U.S. Commercial Service.